



A Living Theology

Series: The Grand Plan of the Glorious God

Ephesians 3:1-13

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What we are going to be looking at this morning, beloved, is the theology of Paul, what I am calling a living theology. When I say that, I am not using the word theology in its formal sense – I don't mean theology proper – the study of the attributes and character of God. I mean it in the sense of what Paul believed, how it ordered his life, the ends that it served – his theology of life. When I speak of Paul's living theology, I am speaking of Paul's comprehension of God and His grace, the calling upon his life and the truth that informed the way he lived. We live in a world, unfortunately, where people in the church claim to believe all sorts of things but whose lives do not really show it. The truth of the matter is this – our lives, for all of our talk and all we might want to be thought true of us, our lives give evidence of what we really believe. Our lives will tell the tale of what we really believe about God, His Christ, our calling as His people, His grace, the Gospel, the church, His word. **What we truly believe is revealed by how we live, not by what we know.** We get a glimpse this morning into the heart of Paul in that regard as he speaks to the Ephesians just a little more regarding the wonder of the church, as He speaks to them out of a heart deeply captivated with Christ and His church.

Notice the way this begins. It seems as if Paul is going to launch into prayer. He starts in verse 1 by saying: **For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles-- (Eph 3:1)** It seems as if Paul is going to pray for the church and he starts out that way, but then he gets sidetracked. He will pray later: **For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, (Eph 3:14)** But before he prays, Paul still has just a little bit more to say about the church. Paul is captivated with Christ and with His church. He loves His Savior and He loves His bride and we see that reflected in the way He speaks of the great privilege that is his to be poured out, to spend and be spent for the sake of souls and for the sake of Christ. As Paul speaks of the church just a little more before he prays, we are going to get a glimpse into his living theology and we will start by seeing that Paul had

A Theology of Faithful Submission to the Sovereign God (v.1) You can see this in the way that Paul refers to himself in this text. In verse 1, he calls himself **"a prisoner for Christ Jesus (or it**

can be translated of Christ Jesus) on behalf of you Gentiles.” What Paul was saying here was literally true. He was a prisoner for Christ, because of what he preached to the Gentiles. What had landed him in jail was the fanatical Jewish opposition to his ministry to the Gentiles. The book of Acts tells the story. Paul had come to Jerusalem with the relief offering for the Jerusalem church from the Gentile churches. Paul went up to the Temple and while he was in the Temple area, some Jews from Asia, where Ephesus was located, saw him and stirred up the crowd that was there. **(Act 21:28-29)** The second accusation, that Paul brought Trophimus, a Greek, into the temple was bunk, but the first accusation was true. Paul had been teaching that Christ had fulfilled the Law of Moses and abolished the law of sacrifices and that the barriers between Jews and Gentiles were broken down. He had been preaching that God was making one new people through faith in Jesus Christ. For that, the Jews grabbed him and were going to kill him, but some Roman soldiers intervened and rescued him. As he was being led away, Paul asked for permission to address the crowd. It was granted and Paul, speaking in Hebrew, told them all the testimony of his life. He spoke of how he was born in Tarsus but raised in Jerusalem at the feet of the great Rabbi Gamaliel. He spoke of his persecution of the church, of Christ’s appearance to him on the road to Damascus, of his salvation experience...you can read about it all in Acts 22. And the crowd listened quietly to everything that he had to say until Paul got to his final point and told them that the Lord had commissioned Paul saying **(Act 22:21-22)** To save Paul’s life he was placed under arrest. The truth was, Paul had been accused by the Jews and arrested by the Romans for teaching the very things that he wrote about in chapter 2. Yet what is Paul’s response? What do we read throughout this letter? Is it complaint and bemoaning of his condition? Is it accusation against God that God had forgotten him? Is it crying about how all of his plans and dreams and hopes and aspirations had all gone up in smoke because of the gospel? Is it crying about how it is just so hard to follow Christ, that it just costs too much, that it is just too tough? No. His response is faithful submission to the sovereign God.

Though it is true that Paul was in jail, a prisoner for Christ, it was also true that he was a prisoner of Christ. Paul was a prisoner in the cause of Christ, a captive in the service of the Redeemer. It is the Lord Jesus who is the King of kings, not Caesar, and He sits on the throne of the universe and he is working all things after the counsel of his own will. He passionately believed in the sovereign providence of God. He was so convinced that the whole of his life was under the Lordship of Christ that he didn’t start asking why me, why now... He was convinced that even this imprisonment would turn out for the sake of God’s glory and for the good of the church. The truth is this: if Paul had dialled it back a little bit and been a little more sensitive to the culture of Judaism, he could have gotten out. But he refused to do that because he wasn't a prisoner of Rome; he was a prisoner of Christ and of the gospel of Christ. He was unwilling to

compromise. Are we faithful, no matter the cost? Are we willing to keep the Gospel pure? Are we willing to proclaim the Gospel no matter what the cost is to us? Paul was because he had a theology of faithful submission to the sovereign God and he had

A Theology of Stewardship of the Gospel (v. 2-6) Paul understands himself to be the steward of the message of God's grace. He has been the recipient of the great mystery of God, the mystery revealed to Him by God, a mystery not revealed to others men throughout history, but revealed to him and to the faithful preachers of the gospel in this day. Paul sees himself, with the other apostles, as a steward of the mysteries of God (**2 Cor 41-2,4-5**). Specifically, Paul is a steward of what he called the "mystery of Christ." He was a steward of the glorious truth that in Jesus Christ was a life of blameless righteousness, of perfect holiness lived out, a righteousness that was sufficient to count for the life of every believing Jewish and Gentile sinner. Christ suffered as the great sacrifice propitiating the wrath of a sin-hating God, not for Jews only but for Gentiles too in the one offering Christ once made on the cross, through which the Gentiles **are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.** The great mystery that Paul was given to proclaim was the mystery of Christ and his church, a new race of Jew and Gentile who would partake of the great promise of God in Christ through the gospel.

Paul was appointed by Christ to be a steward of the gospel of his grace and the mystery of Christ and the church. Paul and the other Apostles did not launch the church because they were a bunch of religious entrepreneurs or franchisers, promoting their business. They were under orders from Jesus Christ and they weren't free to change the message to fit the customers. They had to proclaim the message that the King had commanded them. Paul understood his place as a steward of the grace of God and he knew what that meant. To be a steward of the gospel was both a great honor and a grave responsibility.

David Porter in "The Nature of Power and Truth" wrote these words-- Ministers of the gospel hold a place of immense responsibility to God and the souls of men. If they suppress the truth as it is in Jesus, for fear of offending their hearers; if they substitute laxness of principle, for the doctrines of the cross; dry external morality for practical godliness--they do it at an awful peril. They are not placed on Jerusalem's wall to amuse the multitude with a mock religion in human attire. They are not sent forth to fabricate new theories, or gloss the truth, to render it less offensive to the carnal heart. For to no such end was the Christian ministry instituted. The gospel heralds are not at liberty thus to aspire to change the message. They are ambassadors

from God to deliver His message in its true spirit and genuine simplicity. If they depart from this, through cowardice or thirst for popular applause, they are no longer ambassadors of Christ--but traitors to His cause. And can there be a higher crime committed against the Supreme Majesty, than coming out under a cloak of friendship for Christ--and then aiming destruction at His throne? Verily God will not hold them guiltless. Such treachery will not escape with impunity!

And with what face will the unfaithful preacher meet his hearers at the judgment bar? He had taught his hearers--but had taught them to disbelieve. He had confirmed them in their guilt--by refusing to expose it. He had blinded their eyes about God--by keeping His character out of sight. He had feasted their pride--when they needed humbling. He had pleased their fancies--at the expense of their souls. He had inflated them with expectations of heaven--when on the brink of destruction; and closed their eyes, giving them God-speed with a lie in their right hand! And how is he to settle this account on the day of final reckoning! How is he to clear himself from the blood of souls!

With what will he frame his plea in self-defense, against his flock thus accusing and upbraiding him? "We were your flock--and you were our shepherd. With you were the treasures of knowledge and truth. And why did you withhold from us the message you were sent to deliver? We are undone forever through your unfaithfulness. You never taught us the character of our Judge--nor the truth of his Word. The doctrines you taught us to despise--we find to be the truth of God. You allowed us to sport with His sovereignty and decrees, and in this, you did awfully deceive us. You reproved us politely for disgraceful crimes, but never described to us the sin of our nature. When we were sometimes alarmed at our state and prospects, you hushed our fears by crying, '*peace, peace*', whereas God had said, there is no peace to the wicked!" How overwhelmed with guilt and horror, will such preachers be with their deceived hearers--on the great day of account!

Paul was a faithful steward of the gospel, unwilling to change it, unwilling to soften its truths regardless of the cost, even if it meant imprisonment, because Paul knew the gospel as the grace and power of God to rescue, because God had by the gospel rescued him. For that reason he had

A Theology of Grateful Humility Born of Matchless Grace (v. 7-8) There are some who look at these words of Paul as pious exaggeration or false humility. Though he may have been a really bad dude at one point, certainly Paul cannot be called the least of all the saints. He is an

apostle, a scholar, a missionary, a faithful servant, a willing sufferer for Christ. There must be worse Christians than he is. But that kind of thinking exposes a worldly way of considering our status before God. If anything that we do which is of spiritual good is a result of God's grace working in us and the power of God working through us then we have nothing of which we can boast. What do we have that we have not been given? Paul understood the magnitude of the grace that had been given to him. He understood what great grace it was that God would save him and that God would grant him the honor to proclaim the greatness of Christ. He could look at himself and say without false humility: "I don't deserve to be saved. I don't deserve to be alive. I persecuted the church. I killed Christians. I deserve judgment and hell and death but God has saved me and God has given me the privilege of proclaiming the unsearchable riches of Christ. That is far more than anyone could ask who had done the things that I have done." Paul was gripped by God's grace to Him in spite of his sinfulness. He was motivated by a real humility born of the matchless grace which he had received.

Do we have that sense? Over time we get desensitized to the grace that saved us. We get desensitized to our need for grace. We stop remembering our sinfulness. We start being start thinking that somehow we deserve all of this and that whatever good we do is proof of that. We start to tick off all the religious and spiritual things we do to justify ourselves and make ourselves look good before other and before God and what we are really doing without knowing it is undermining our love for and devotion to God. But beloved, consider the price of your redemption, that the mighty God of heaven, moved by compassion alone, sent his own beloved Son into this world dying the accursed death of the cross. Redemption became yours by His perfect life laid down in your place. Even the power to live in manner worthy of the calling of Christ, comes from Him.

When Paul says this it is not some morbid attitude, it simply reality. We need to be gripped with the greatness of God's grace to us as well. It needs to shape and form our lives like it did Paul. We are all made servants of the gospel by the grace of God and that service to the gospel, that ministering of the gospel is not just in the big things only – like devoting my life to the mission field. It is shaping your life around the gospel, giving up the will to control our own lives, putting sin to death, serving other people in the name of Christ, giving to other people when it costs to do so, rejecting the rampant materialism and self-absorption of the world, taking up the cross daily, laying down our lives – our rights, our demands, our comforts, our agendas, our schedules for the sake of the gospel. It is the ceding of our imagined sovereignty over our lives to our rightful king. This is the theology of humility. There can be no real

ministry, no God-exalting ministry, where such humility is lacking. Paul had that, as I said, because he had

A Theology of the Unsearchable Riches of Christ (v. 8) Paul was given by God's grace the great privilege of preaching **to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ**. The riches of election, redemption, forgiveness, adoption, the gift of the Spirit, the inheritance of heaven, the resurrection from the dead and millions of blessings besides, all purchased by the blood of Christ. That word unsearchable is a word that means 'inexplorable,' 'untraceable,' 'unfathomable,' 'inexhaustible,' 'illimitable,' 'inscrutable,' 'infinite' and 'incalculable.' Paul saw riches in Christ which could not be traced out or explored. His riches are unsearchable because of the poverty of we who desperately need them and the glory of who gives them. Christ in every way, is far above us. By him was everything made, and without him was not anything made that was made. He stood to gain nothing from us but bearing our guilt and shame, yet he gave **for** us his life, gave **to** us his love, to bring us to God forever. Never were such riches bestowed on those who were so utterly powerless and incapable of benefiting the lover as in the redeeming love of the Lord Jesus Christ. His riches are unsearchable because of what they do in the hearts of those who receive them. When we have tasted of the riches of Christ we long all the more for Him and we cannot be satisfied with less. Your soul will refuse to be satisfied with anything less. You will demand Christ. Nothing else will satisfy you. You will want to be where He is, where his word is proclaimed and He is exalted. You will seek the fellowship of His people. You will search the Scriptures daily. The more you discover of him the more you discover just how little you know and how much you need to learn. Paul knew what it was to preach the unsearchable riches of the Christ who saves sinners and he knew what it was to preach of the church. Paul had

A Theology of Revelation – the Church, the Manifold Wisdom of God (v.9-12)

Paul is saying, I am a blessed man. I have received great grace. Not only do I get to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ, but I also get to bring to light for everyone, I get to explain and describe the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in the God who has created all things. I get to preach of the church, the body of Christ, the new man, the new nation of God." Paul delights that he got to preach that mystery which had not been revealed to the Old Testament prophets, that God was going to build a people for Himself from every tribe and tongue and

nation, unite them by the blood of Christ into the church, a people from every conceivable background, some Jews, some Gentiles, some from nations that oppose one another, from every kind of socio-economic level, various personalities and make of them a people, a kingdom, a family a temple of living souls that love God and love one another, that love the gospel and that love God's Word. The church is the demonstration of the manifold wisdom of God -- His salvation, His redemption, His grace, and His glory.

Paul delighted to be chosen to tell the people of God the glorious news, that it is God's plan through His church to manifest His wisdom and glory to the whole universe, so that Satan and the demons who fell with him will be shamed and humbled before the wise and awesome display of God's grace and power, and so that the holy angels themselves are left amazed at the power of what God has done. But this display is not future only. We display the manifold wisdom of God to the angelic powers and to the world as we adorn the gospel with our lives even now. By our unity in Christ's body, by our living out the implications of the gospel, we are preaching to the angelic beings about the power, wisdom, and glory of the God who made us even now. In fact, the rest of this book is all application, how we must adorn our lives with gospel so that all who see will be astonished at what God has done in His church through the blood and the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul then closes by showing us

All For the Sake of Christ and His Church (v.13) Paul had a theology that was greater than himself, greater than his personal convenience, greater than his comfort, greater than his desires. He lived all for the sake of Christ and His church. For that reason he says: **So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory. (Eph 3:13)** Paul had a living theology bigger than himself. He was willing to suffer for the sake of Christ and as he says here, for the sake of his church. Paul understood the worth and the glory of Christ and of His church.

In all of this, what we see is this overarching truth – Paul had a living theology that was shaped by his devotion to Christ and by his devotion to the church and the obvious question that we must ask is this: Do we? I mean really. As I said at the beginning of this sermon, the inescapable fact of the matter is this – our lives, for all of our talk and all we might want to be thought true of us, our lives give evidence of what we really believe. Our lives will tell the tale of what we really believe about God, His Christ, our calling as His people, His grace, the Gospel, the church, His word. **What is it that shapes your life?** What drives the decisions that you make on a daily basis? What shapes the way you conduct business? What shapes the way you

deal with your spouse and children? Fathers, what shapes the way that you lead your families? Mothers, what shapes the way that you train your children? What shapes your pursuits? What shapes the way you invest your life or your money? What shapes your desires? What shapes your words, your actions? What shapes your priorities? JC Ryle said: The religion of a sort that is public, and not private; plenty abroad, but none at home; plenty without, but none within; plenty in the tongue, but none in the heart is altogether unprofitable, good for nothing, and bears no fruit.

Paul had a living theology that was shaped by his devotion to Christ and by his devotion to the church...do you?

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